

**Statement of
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United States Department of Agriculture**

**Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives**

**on
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Concerning

Recreational Fee Demonstration Program

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am Denny Bschor, Acting Associate Deputy Chief for the National Forest System. We appreciate the Committee's interest in reviewing the recreational fee demonstration program and would like to work with Congress on developing a replacement for this very important program.

The recreational fee demonstration program was first authorized by Congress in the fiscal year (FY) 1996 Interior Appropriations Act (Section 315 of Public Law 104-134). It has given the Forest Service, Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Land Management an important opportunity to test the notion of "user-pays" recreation where fees are collected and expended on-site to provide enhanced user services and facilities. The current authorization expires on September 30, 2002. Unless the demonstration program is extended or new authority is granted, this important tool will disappear at the end of FY 2002, and our phase-out will begin even sooner.

While some of our visitors and Forest Service employees are ambivalent over the idea of charging fees for recreation use on our national forests, taxpayers generally benefit when the cost of public services are at least partially borne by the direct users of these services. Ideally, with fee support for direct services, other critical recreation resource needs for the Forest Service would be fully funded through the appropriations process. Since there will always be limits on available resources, the existing fee authority complements our appropriated funds to better meet our visitors' expectations. The four agencies authorized to test fee retention have been working together at the local, regional, and national levels to gain better public understanding and resolve implementation issues.

Through FY 2000, nearly \$70 million in new funding has been generated above congressional appropriations to enhance the visitor experience at 88 national forest projects across the United States. Program funds are making a crucial difference in providing quality recreation services, reducing maintenance backlog, enhancing facilities, enhancing safety and security, and conserving natural resources. Many of these services can be provided by Forest Service employees and equipment. In many cases, however, fee receipts collected by the Forest Service are used to fund service contracts providing additional economic benefit to our local communities.

Some of the direct investments by the Forest Service of fee receipts through FY 2000 include:

- Nearly \$17 million to reduce backlog maintenance and address public health and safety concerns through repair and/or replacement of inadequate toilets, picnic tables, building roofs, water and sewer lines, trails, and other facilities. Examples include maintenance of 940 miles of trails in Oregon and Washington, repair or replacement of four toilets, 300 shade ramadas, 25 picnic tables, and 50 fire ring/grills at Roosevelt Lake in Arizona; and repair of a sewer line at Sitting Bull Falls in New Mexico.
- Over \$7 million for new and improved interpretive and informational materials and services, such as signs, brochures, campfire talks, and visitor center staffing. Visitor centers at Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument in Washington operated for longer hours with additional interpretive talks than otherwise possible. Evans Notch Visitor Center in New Hampshire contacted 34,000 visitors and provided numerous children's programs. El Portal Visitor Center in Puerto Rico reached some 8,400 visitors through the "Rent-A-Ranger" and "Forest Adventure" programs.
- About \$3 million for habitat enhancement and resource preservation such as improvements for wildlife viewing and fishing, erosion control devices, and historic building restoration. The Pack Creek bear viewing platform in Alaska allowed more than 1,400 visitors to view brown bears safely. Historic cabins throughout Arizona and New Mexico were rehabilitated for public use.
- \$2 million for law enforcement to enhance the safety and accountability of all users, including 3,603 additional visitor contacts, 34 public "emergency assists," and extinguishing 83 abandoned campfires in southern California. At Canyon Creek in Colorado, visitor contacts increased 80%.
- Almost \$5 million for facility enhancements such as new trails, new campsites, and accessibility for the disabled. Some examples include leveraging funding with Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado to build a nature center on Mt. Evans near Denver, Colorado; improved wheelchair accessibility at three boat ramps and a beach on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest; and new restrooms and an interpretive shelter at Keown Falls, Georgia.
- About \$20 million for annual operation including visitor services, litter removal, toilet pumping, water sampling, supplies, and services, such as reserved permits, camping reservations, and heritage expeditions. One ton of refuse and abandoned materials were removed from wilderness areas in Idaho and Montana. The Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Minnesota maintained 660 wilderness campsites and 333 miles of trails. The Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania increased visitor contacts at boat launches and increased recreation site maintenance.

The recreational fee demonstration authority encourages experimentation with a broad variety of fees to test feasibility and public acceptance. We made a conscious effort to avoid top-down directions and a "one-size-fits-all" approach to encourage creativity and local decisions as to how this program should be implemented. We have not allowed any indirect expenses to be paid with fee receipts.

Initiation of fees has stirred some controversy and generated public and media interest. In the first years of experimentation, we did not always get it right. Some people remember those early problems to this day. But, we have listened, learned, and adjusted, and we continue to adapt to changing situations and new information today. The Forest Service has made a number of changes to projects based on public comment and our own monitoring. We would be glad to share with you the results of our public comment cards and survey and research information we have compiled. We have consolidated fees in places like the Pacific Northwest, where the "Northwest Forest Pass" replaced multiple fees on individual forests. We are providing better information on expenditures to our stakeholders, and inviting comments on how future revenue should be spent. We are working with other state and federal agencies to coordinate programs and fees. We are conducting market studies prior to implementation to learn more about visitor preferences. We are developing an understanding of what works and what does not.

Throughout the first five years of the "fee demo" program, evaluation through research and monitoring has been ongoing. We believe that we now have enough information to examine what has been learned, provide a public forum for the program through congressional hearings, and develop policy for a nationally consistent, but locally driven, fee program. In developing this program, we would like to work with Congress on the lessons we have learned through the pilot program to establish standards of where and when to charge a fee.

Based upon our research, we believe that policy objectives for the Forest Service fee program should include consideration for:

- **Equity and community needs:** Fees are fair and consider the needs of all potential users, including low income and minority communities.
- **Efficiency:** Fees encourage efficient delivery and use of public services.
- **Consistency and Coordination:** Fees are convenient to pay and agency policies do not discourage recreation use.
- **Revenue Production:** Fees supply an appropriate amount of revenue to provide for unmet recreational visitor and management needs, with a special understanding of the need to reduce the maintenance backlog.
- **Revenue Distribution:** Fees provide value at the site where they are collected.

Fees are only one tool to achieve recreation management objectives. We have developed specific management standards and have calculated costs to achieve those standards. In addition to appropriated funding, means such as volunteers, concession operations, donations and grants, partnerships, and recreation fees help the Forest Service meet our objectives.

The four agencies currently authorized to collect and retain recreation fees have been working together, along with a fifth agency, the Bureau of Reclamation, to draft proposed authorizing

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legislation for a recreation fee program. We would appreciate the opportunity to work with the committee in the very near future on developing a replacement for the recreational fee demonstration program. A successful recreation fee program is more than collecting dollars. It is a way to manage our ever-increasing recreation use.

This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.